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Education

Wanted: More Kremlinologists

Soviet studies in the U.S. are in an alarming decline

The U.S.S.R.'s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 surprised most U.S. Kremlin-watchers. So did Soviet inactivity during the recent war in Lebanon. After Leonid Brezhnev's death two weeks ago, American Kremlinologists were still suggesting the names of his potential successors when Yuri Andropov was chosen.

To be sure, the inner workings of the Politburo have always been obscure to outsiders, but the uncertainty about Andropov underscores the current lack of American expertise on the Soviet Union. Even the Central Intelligence Agency admits that it is having trouble providing the kind of analysis needed by U.S. policymakers. Says a CIA spokesman: "It is becoming more difficult to recruit graduate

HUGH PATRICK BROWN

Former Ambassador to the U.S.S.R., W. Averell Harriman meets with students at Columbia

"Policy that is based on ignorance and illusion is dangerous."

(OUGR)

students who have a real understanding of Soviet internal affairs." Notes Paul K. Cook, the top Kremlinologist at the State Department: "The number of well-trained senior Soviet specialists just suffices for the moment, but within five to ten years they will all be gone. The situation is severe and getting worse."

By all accounts, Soviet studies are in an alarming decline in the U.S. In 1968, 607 colleges and universities offered courses in Russian to about 41,000 students. In the fall of 1980, only 472 institutions provided Russian instruction to 24,000 students. In fact, more American college and graduate students now study Latin than Russian. Says Deming B. Brown, former director of the University of Michigan's Center for Russian and East European Studies: "We are just not turning out enough people who know the Russian language, and that suggests a dangerously condescending attitude toward the Soviet Union." At the graduate level, the decline is more startling. In 1980 about 100 doctorates were awarded in Soviet and Eastern European fields, most of them in literature and history. During the past decade, there has been an average of six dissertations a year on Soviet foreign policy by American graduate students with a working knowledge of Russian.

The Soviet approach to American studies, on the other hand, is systematic and thorough. There are more teachers of English in the U.S.S.R. than there are students of Russian in the U.S. The prestigious Institute of U.S.A. and Canada in Moscow has an estimated 300 staffers doing research on the U.S. One expert says this is more than all the combined total of Slavic faculty members at the dozen U.S. universities that lead in Soviet studies.

Soviet studies did not always have a low priority in the U.S. Immediately after World War II, with the help of the Ford Foundation, Columbia established its Russian Institute and Harvard set up the Russian Research Center to promote study in Soviet history, politics, economics and literature. In 1958, the year after the Soviets' triumphant launch of Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided Government funds for Soviet-studies programs at such universities as Washington, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, California (Berkeley), Indiana and Stanford. By 1970, however, Government and foundation funds began drying up. Between 1967 and 1976, federal contracts for all foreign affairs research dropped from $40 million to less than $20 million. Détente with the U.S.S.R., a national preoccupation with Viet Nam and the Middle East, and economic crises in higher education all contributed to the decline in Soviet studies.

Discouraged by the high cost of graduate education, the paucity of fellowships, and the unsteady job prospects, students are not rushing into Soviet studies. Slavic languages are not easy to learn, sources are often inaccessible, and the U.S.S.R. is unreceptive to U.S. scholars. Even after years of training, a Soviet specialist's job opportunities wax and wane with the climate of détente. The CIA today reports a shortage of Soviet experts, yet it let many go in the '70s. At Harvard's Russian Research Center, Director Adam Ulam is concerned about "the general dearth of specialists" as many of his senior faculty members approach retirement. The center operates on the same $175,000 annual budget that it had in the mid-1960s, which makes it increasingly difficult to fund major research projects. Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute has fared a little better, only because 10,000 Ukrainian Americans have supported it with gifts of more than $4 million over the past decade. Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute director Alexander Rabinowitch admits, "We're only managing to muddle through. For lack of funding we are losing quality."

There are a few signs, however, of a revitalization of Soviet studies. The Ford Foundation made grants of $7 million for this academic year, and the Rockefeller Foundation is considering a $2 million program to stimulate Soviet foreign policy studies. Columbia's Russian Institute received last month a $10 million gift from W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1943 to 1946. Says Harriman: "Policy that is based on ignorance and illusion is dangerous."

There are also new stirrings of congressional concern. In September, Senators Joseph Biden of Delaware, a Democrat, and Richard Lugar of Indiana, a Republican, introduced a bill that would set up a $50 million endowment for Soviet studies. The money will come none too soon. Says Marshall D. Shulman, director of Columbia's newly named Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union: "The lead time for training a first-class specialist on the Soviet Union is longer than the lead time for a new missile." And the product may be more important. ***—By Ellie McGrath. Reported by Christopher Redman/Washington and Bruce van Voorst/New York***